

# Mt Victoria Historical Society News

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## **June – Heritage Month in the Wellington Region Immigration and the People**

### **Sunday, June 18 at 2.00 pm in Crossways - *The Greek Community in Mt Victoria***

Many of us know that there is a Hania Street in Mt Victoria and that there are many families of Greek origin living in our suburb.

We have arranged for a member of the Greek Community in Mt Victoria to come and tell us more about their coming to New Zealand – why they came, why they chose to live in Mt Victoria, their experiences in arriving and making a life here.

### **The Greek connection in Mount Victoria**

There are strong Greek and Cretan communities in Wellington, one of which is centred on Mt Victoria. Hania Street is named after the old capital of Crete and the city with which Wellington is twinned in a sister city relationship. The street was created in 1990 when Lloyd and Nelson Streets were connected in the middle and renamed. Appropriately, it is the street on which the Greek Orthodox Church is located.

The Sister City Charter between Wellington and Hania was signed on May 19, 1984 in Hania to celebrate the contribution of the Greek and Cretan communities to Wellington and the strong links and special friendships formed since World War II. An olive tree was planted beside the Michael Fowler Centre to mark the occasion but this has now been moved to the Greek/New Zealand memorial site between Kent and Cambridge Terraces on the border of Mt Victoria. In 1990, the two cities 'exchanged' street names to mark the New Zealand army's part in the Battle of Crete in 1941. Wellington celebrates *Hania Day* on May 21, which is also when commemorations for the Battle of Crete take place.

Turn over for more information about the Battle of Crete and its significance in the relationship between the Greek/Cretan community and New Zealand.

### **What we have planned for the year**

After the huge success of our last meeting on renovations, we are planning another one end of October/early November with new and interesting angles.

The Committee is also working on completing the Mt Victoria walking guide this year. It will contain more fascinating facts about the history of the suburb, which you'll be able to imagine as you walk around yourself or with visitors. If you have interesting information about the history of the area from about Marjoribanks St to the Mount Vic. tunnel – for instance about businesses, hospitals, schools, people or events, or if you have old photographs, please contact Jo Newman.

And on that theme, we would love help with research (sometimes for an identified project, but also if you have a particular interest yourself) so please contact us if you are interested in this.

### **No. 21 Shannon Street**

One of the projects we have been working on recently is researching the history behind 21 Shannon St. There is currently a proposal to demolish this and construct a huge two-unit development on the site, totally out of keeping with the area. Shannon St is in the Northern Mt Victoria special character area, as defined by the recently approved Variation 14, so we are concerned about such developments in the area. If you also are concerned, please contact us or the Mt Victoria Residents Ass. for more information.

# Historical Note

## The Battle of Crete

The Battle of Crete was a significant episode in World War II for New Zealanders. Crete was strategically very important to the Allies, to help them secure the eastern Mediterranean and defend Egypt. In April 1941 Hitler declared that Crete must be occupied to provide a base for aerial warfare against Britain in the eastern Mediterranean.

The commanders directly in charge of Crete at the time, however, did not fully grasp its importance or the imminence of the German invasion. The island was, therefore, hopelessly and needlessly unprepared for attack.

At the end of April 1941 the Allies were driven out of Greece by the advancing Germans and on April 29<sup>th</sup> the New Zealand troops and others being evacuated started arriving in Crete. Most of the New Zealand Division was amongst the evacuees. A composite battalion of New Zealanders was made up from all sorts of different units and backgrounds as they arrived in Crete – there were a total of 7,500 New Zealanders in the Crete garrison. In the three weeks which followed their arrival, the soldiers rested and developed a good relationship with the hospitable locals.

The New Zealander, General Freyberg, was finally put in charge of the forces in Crete but realised how hopelessly prepared they were if an attack were to take place. He had very few fighting troops and those he had were poorly equipped, exhausted and disorganised following the evacuation. There was little in the way of military equipment, tools or supplies. Freyberg communicated his concern to the New Zealand Government who, in turn, expressed concern to Churchill about the deployment of the New Zealand Division in Crete, requesting that they either be given the means to defend themselves or that the decision to defend at all costs be reversed.

The German airborne offensive began on May 20. The first attacks were born entirely by the New Zealanders. This was the first great airborne invasion in history, with over a thousand planes dropping thousands of paratroopers from the sky. Much of the Battle of Crete from this point on consisted of fierce, hand-to-hand fighting. In spite of their superiority, the Germans achieved only a narrow victory in taking the airfield at Maleme and in subsequent attacks. Many individuals distinguished themselves by acts of bravery and heroism in this Battle, including Charles Upham and the Maori Battalion.

Once the airport was taken, however, there was little hope for the defenders of Crete. On May 27, the order was given to withdraw from the island. The only hope for the ANZACs at Suda, Canea and Galatas was a 65 kilometre trek across the island to the south coast over some of the roughest country in the world. They staggered, exhausted and wounded, through the mountains without food or water, discarding gear as they went. When they reached the coast, there was not always transport available and they had to disperse into the mountains again and wait. (Peter McIntyre, recently appointed New Zealand's official war artist and on his first assignment, was part of that retreat.) Three days later the last evacuation ship left. Roughly 15,000 men were taken to Egypt but 14,000 remained behind killed, wounded or taken prisoner.

The people of Crete sheltered, fed and clothed many New Zealanders left behind, further strengthening the bond between the two countries.

One of the participants described the Battle of Crete as “beyond doubt the most extraordinary battle of all time.”

Uren, Martin, Kiwi Saga: Memoirs of a New Zealand Artilleryman, Collins, 1943

Cruickshank, Charles, Greece 1940-41, Davis-Poynter Ltd, 1976

Laffin, John, Australians at War: Greece, Crete & Syria, Time-Life Books (Australia) Pty Ltd, 1989